



## CONSTRUCTING NOT DEFINED OR CLASSIFIABLE SPACES

**"LA PORTA" GIVES INSIGHTS ABOUT THEIR WORK, THE IMPORTANCE, THE POWER, AND THE PRECARIOUS SITUATION AS INDEPENDENT STRUCTURE IN BARCELONA IN RELATION TO THE ARTISTIC FIELD.**

By Sabina Holzer

La Porta is an artists' collective working in Barcelona, and founded in 1992. Since then, it has generated activities and context for creating, thinking and investigating contemporary performance based on body and movement. It supports works, artists and experiences which change the way the body and dance are presented and represented.

La Porta is also an independent structure connecting venues, artists and audiences through activities ranging from programming particular pieces and supporting artists to theoretical reflection and documentation.

I meet Ana Buitrago and Oscar Dasí, two of the artistic directors in the center of Barcelona. The office is in a beautiful old building, where no room is "properly" square, with doors in different heights and windows in all directions. The office is in a medium-sized space one enters from the stairway.

Oscar Dasí tells how La Porta started: "The impulse to create a platform like this came from the artists who needed to present their work. Because of economical circumstances in that period, there were mainly short pieces. Everybody who wanted to present their work could do so. Everything was low budget, and neither did the structure have a budget to work on a professional level.

"Admission to the presentations was free; the artists wanted to present it, and La Porta made it possible. There was no money at all.

But by and by the situation changed, and the artists gradually consolidated their work, evolving from short to long works and generating new needs. In this new context, La Porta began to look beyond borders and local productions in order to nurture a scene that tended towards endogamy and lacked contemporary references. Meanwhile, La Porta began to receive public funding and set up connections and relationships with similar entities, arts centres and venues, thereby increasing the volume and repercussion of its activities.

The need to become more professional changed La Porta's relationship with the cultural context in order to continue acting in a way that was coherent with the sector. This change requires an extensive, almost political explanation. It needs an analysis that hasn't yet been written, or only exists in the way the activities have evolved so far.

Different artists have formed La Porta over time; they all worked so that La Porta could be an association that is open to the city and contemporary arts, and to attain the complicity and interest of this field and the general public.

### Terminology of Support

Ana Buitrago explains that Oscar Dasí, Carmelo Salazar and herself since 2005 have been working along three lines:

"One is a line we call "*espacios cómodos*" (*comfortable spaces*), which is more linked to support projects with artists which we have followed for a long period and had dialogues with.

We are also in touch with younger artists and try to support their current projects. This is why we chose the term "comfortable space" because there is never enough money to really co-produce these projects, but we try to facilitate and make the processes the artists are already developing a bit more comfortable. So through this line we try to offer the artist the possibility of some continuity with what they are questioning at the moment. Sometimes it does not at all fit in with the categories for research or production established by the cultural institutions in our country. These spaces are something we offer the artist, and it does not necessarily have to translate into any sort of public presentation later – it always depends on the specific needs of each case.

Then we have "*los huecos*" (*the gaps*), which is an open space offered to a specific artist. We invite this person for a *carte blanche* centred on his/her thoughts, activities and questions parallel to their stage work. We like "*the gaps*" to be open for the audience. At the beginning we never know which form they will take, as these are always projects we work out together with the artist. With Elena Córdoba, for instance, it was a photographic exhibition accompanied by some poems from another artist with whom she collaborates often. The exhibition was on for 7 days. During this period there was also a talk with the choreographer where she explained her private relationship with photography and how this accompanies her. In other cases, we printed some small books with drawings and poems, or generated diverse performative talks. In each case "*the gap*" is always the result of our dialogue with some specific interest of an artist, where the focus is to open other spaces for research where the public also can come in touch with the process of thought. For us it is an especially creative relationship because it requires a close collaboration between La Porta and the artist."

*Gaps* and *comfortable spaces* nowadays are presented in the context of "cycles", which take place three or four times a year.

Each cycle is configured on the basis of specific characteristics, situations of the artists and the fabric of dance at the time. During two or three weeks they present different works and approaches in different spaces of the city and create a wider context for the audience.

### Nomadic Approach and Other Unusual Ways of Producing

This leads to another very interesting and unique way La Porta operates: La Porta doesn't have a physical space besides the office. Everything they do is in association with existing physical spaces in the city. The great advantage of this is that it allows them to answer to the specific needs of the artist rather than the architectural needs of a space. At the same time they depend on whatever existing spaces are free and available. This always takes some negotiation and trying to balance out between what the artist wants and how it is possible to present it.

"We try to have a very personal relation with the artist and the project," Oscar Dasí says. "Of course not forgetting about production meanings and so on. But we always try to put the emphasis on the dialogue with the artist. Sometimes we are supporting a project and we do not present it. Then after some time, we find a way to present it. If we do not find the right connection, we don't. We do not have so many possibilities. We just make three or four cycles a year. So we don't have so many moments of exhibition. Sometimes we present a piece even if we are not so interested in that specific piece, but we are interested in the artist and the need of visibility of his/her work at that moment. It is quite an unusual way of producing and interacting."

"We also try to communicate to the artists the kind of environment they are coming to," Ana adds. "We open spaces which are not so easy to define and classify, so we have to build them together. I think that is important. Sometimes when you try to do that with young people, they are so excited and eager to get a chance that they immediately frame it in a standard manner. But in general it works quite okay, it is a space to discover together and should answer to the needs of that specific moment in their artistic process."

### What Is Dance and What Is Not

In spring, 2007 La Porta organized the "Festival de dansa ... o no". "It is not a question we ask ourselves, but it is always coming up to us," Oscar clarifies. After a long process, in which a designer and a philologist were involved, they decided to use it as the name of the festival, without a question mark added, in order to jump forward and pass it on to the audience.

Oscar continues: "The Sitges International Theatre Festival closed after 25 years. And at that moment the Catalanian government said that they would support other programs and festivals which are necessary, organized by independent structures with a background. So they decided that La Porta could organize a festival. We had been working for that for years, and suddenly it happened. The Catalanian Government and the City Council were with us, and the media too."

"We were supposed to make a *festival*. And La Porta doesn't have the structure to organize an '*international festival*'. But of course we knew we should do it. Out of many reasons: this kind of support could help creations which normally stay at the periphery of the cultural tissue get into the center of attention. They got in the center. And we were sure that in this city there was more than the habitual audience, who would enjoy approaching such works."

For La Porta, the name "Festival de dansa ... o no" also refers to their critical attitude towards festivals.

"The title really made people get more relaxed in their expectations. Sometimes it's really absurd," Ana wonders. "You try to explain something lots of times – and then you just add two words: '... o no', and suddenly they relax and sit in front of an experience. It is a live experience and it happens in that moment and they are completely open. Even the media introduced the festival in a very relaxed way, sometimes even pedagogical."

During the festival, installations and performances were presented by people coming from dance who now, e.g., did a video-projection or worked more in the visual arts field. There were premieres, pieces five years old, open research process, a site-specific video and plants occupation, two savage nights commissioned to eight artists coming from dance, performance, music or visual arts, talks, a live streaming experimental TV channel run by a collective of artists, round debate tables with the audience ... All of them proposals that continue the different lines of work they keep active during their regular doing/programming.

"There were interviews on television or the radio saying: La Porta organizes 'LP – festival de dansa ... o no', so what do you think: What is dance, and why? And suddenly even the journalists discussed it with each other; so even the title itself became a topic for critical thought," Oscar tells. "I have no idea how we will name it next time. If there is a next time. Maybe we'll have to repeat the name."

In this way, although they produced a festival, La Porta managed to stay true to their way of working.

### Need for Critical Approach to the Process of Creation

So what are the wishes for the future? La Porta finds itself in a time of change. They are reflecting/re-questioning their own structure and necessities in relation to the local dance situation; moreover, the political situation in Spain is changing, too.

"During the last years, the official cultural policy in Catalunya has opened its support to research projects, structures and spaces, something that moves the possibilities in the region," Ana says. "Until 3 years ago, everything was framed around the idea of company or production. Even if you were an independent artist, you were forced to fall into the rhythm of producing one or two pieces a year to keep a small structure going on. This is starting to shift now. This is special, because even the residencies, which also is something just beginning to happen in Spain, are mainly based on the idea of production: they give you a space so that you can rehearse something that you will show."

"But we feel that through the festival we did and the way we programmed throughout the years, we were trying to modify and shift the preconception. Now the question is: what is the relationship with creation? It is about time to get more in touch with other references, not just presentation," Oscar says: "It is a question not only for the outside, but also for the artist him- or herself. Ana: "In Spain, the performing arts and especially contemporary dance is not a proper study. It has never been taught at the university. Now probably it has to come, because of the European Community laws. Until a few years ago, it was a middle degree. Now it will become a higher degree. Most of the dance-performance education was framed within the conservatorium training. There was never a more critical approach to performing arts, even less to a concept such as Live Arts, except in a few departments belonging to fine arts universities, where the approach is more historical than analytical or practical."

"The process of creation is still based on the way companies function, which again is related mostly to the 80ies."

Dance making/creation is received in that frame. And I think that during the last 10 years, many other ways of working have started to really be at hand for many artists in Europe and other places. I think this is still lacking here, also because we did not see so much of that kind of work. So this is also an important thing that we try to do, present or help circulate through here, works which deal with artistic production, authorship and process in other ways."

As a future line of action, La Porta wonders how they can make a connection between the different structures which have developed throughout the country during the last years. Until now, La Porta never chose for an institutionalized way of networking, which means just getting support via an administrative or political connection, like the EU offers. La Porta handled networking the same way they connect with artists: through dialogue and exchange of interest, they wanted to develop a more artistic or philosophical way of supporting, exhibiting and accompanying.

And Oscar continues: "We have to question what is to be our field of action, because we are really a small structure. Whether we'll start to focus more on making artists circulate, confront and exchange approaches and thoughts, within artistic laboratories, trying to generate "other" practical, mental and relational spaces for the artists. And if we try to generate some seminars which question certain issues at the same time, we are taking away a lot of resources from programming and supporting specific work. So right now we are really facing this junction, asking ourselves where we should place the focus of our doing. Because at the moment we are trying to keep all those different possibilities going. Simultaneously, the structure is growing and it is becoming a bit too much to keep all the different levels going. It is really a moment for questioning. We're even thinking about doing the festival on a biennial base and using it as the specific frame for exhibiting works. But at the same time, if this kind of work has no space to be seen in the city for two years, that is quite a long absence. And actually it contradicts one of the basic ideas of the festival, as we always conceived it as a continuation of the works and spaces we open more regularly with our cycles. So our idea of the festival was always that of generating a bigger cluster of proposals, but that it should emerge from an ongoing presence and continuous work with contemporary critical dance art work."

"Now there are many independent structures (La Ponderosa, La Caldera, L'animal a l'esquena, NU'2La Mekanica, AreaTangent ...) which support artists through residences, other structures organize seminars on a theoretical base, program performances and so on. And now we don't know. Maybe we will be back where we started 5 years ago. We are nomadic. We are also nomadic in terms of content. For us it is a moment of readjustment," Ana says. At the moment La Porta does not know if they can continue working. "Our aim is the artistic project. We are always balancing between the artistic project and the structure for production. We have to deal with economics and politics, and at the same time we have this artistic desire," Oscar says. "The most important thing is to keep asking what is really useful. For the scene. For the city. For us. To figure out the utility."

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